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ABSTRACT

Anticipation of academic, professional, and career-related benefits and opportunities for friendship and belonging lead many young people to become members of career and technical education (CTE) student organizations. Because all CTE student organizations share similar goals for membership and participation, outcomes of a Purdue University study of participation in Future Farmers of America (FFA) are relevant for all CTE student organizations. Key findings show students involved in FFA are more enthusiastic about and attach greater value to school studies than do average students, more likely than the average student to relate personal effort to success, and more likely to prepare for postsecondary studies and attend two- and four-year colleges. Members are inspired to join because peers or family members have recommended membership. This motivation for membership appears to nurture a motivation for learning. Members believe they can realize success in their chosen career area, have more specific career goals, and are more likely to work in high school, which enhances their professional development. They are more actively engaged in community and school activities. Two primary ways CTE student organizations can motive new students to join and participate in activities are to make their focus more relevant to today's workplace and strive to recruit a diverse student population. (Contains 13 references.) (YLB)

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ERIC DIGEST

no. 235

CTE Student Organizations

by Bettina Lankard Brown

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Student organizations have been established to support and enhance learning in many career-technical fields: Future Farmers of America (FFA), agriculture; Future Business Leaders of America (FBLA), business; Distributive Education Clubs of America (DECA), marketing; Technology Student Association (TSA), technology; and Health Occupations Students of America (HOSA), allied health. These organizations provide opportunities for leadership development, service learning, and career exploration. Students, teachers, and parents expect that membership in these organizations will result in learning and enhanced skills as well as the development of positive values, social skills, and an ability to work independently and collaboratively (Vaughn, Kieth, and Lockaby 1999; Williams 2001). It is the anticipation of these academic, professional, and career-related benefits, as well as opportunities for friendship and belonging, that lead many young people to become members of career and technical education (CTE) student organizations. Intended for CTE educators, this **Digest** reviews research on outcomes students have realized from membership in these organizations and describes how the organizations are changing as CTE evolves.

Outcomes of Participation in CTE Student Organizations

A major research study was conducted by Purdue University comparing agricultural education students to the "typical high school student," as quantified in ***The State of Our Nation's Youth*** (Reese 2001). The Purdue study showed outcomes for students who participated in FFA, a CTE student organization with about 450,000 members (Stagg and Stuller 1999). Because all career-technical student organizations share similar goals for membership and participation, the outcomes of the Purdue study serve as the basis for this discussion, focusing on four major outcome areas: scholarship, motivation, professional development, and citizenship.

Scholarship

Key findings of the Purdue study showed that students involved in FFA are more enthusiastic about and attach greater value to their school studies than do average students. The FFA students also are more actively engaged in school activities, more likely than the average student to relate personal effort to success, and more likely to prepare for postsecondary studies and attend two-year and four-year colleges (Reese 2001).

One reason CTE student organizations inspire scholarship is that the school-business partnerships that characterize these organizations connect school learning to its application in the workplace. Minorities in Agriculture, National Resources, and Related Sciences (MANRRS) is one such national student organization that is committed to fostering partnerships between minority students in agriculture and national resources and professionals from academia, government, and business. Through MANRRS membership, students are able to network with more than 50 governmental, private industry, and educational entities. Studies showed that college freshmen and upperclass students who participated in MANRRS in 1993-94 (mostly African Americans and Hispanics), "had a 70% graduation rate within 6 years compared to a 56% average projected graduation rate for these groups for the entire university. Fifty-three percent graduated in 4 years or less; 3% graduated in 5 years of less; and 87% had received degrees by August 1998" (Talbert, Larke, and Jones 1999, p. 5).

Motivation

Students who become members of CTE student organizations are inspired to join because their peers or family members have recommended membership, they desire to participate in career-related activities and competitions, and they want to connect with other students who share common career interests. This motivation for membership appears to nurture a motivation for learning. According to the Purdue study, "83 percent of FFA students consider their agriculture courses to be exciting, interesting, and challenging as compared to only 32% of typical students. These students are also more likely to believe the amount of work they do in school is important to their success later in life and more likely to believe it is important to do their best in all of their classes" (Reese 2001, p. S17).

A positive attitude about the benefits of CTE student organizations often occurs as a result of the testimonials of other members of the organization. For example, Katrina Miller's decision to join the Technology Student Association was influenced by a former TSA president who spoke at a TSA Fall Leadership Conference. "She told us about the TSA offices she had won and her achievements in TSA competitions. She was so poised and passionate, and I knew right then that if she could do these things, I could too" (Miller and Meuleners 2000, p. 24.).

Professionalism

Many students join CTE student organizations because they believe membership experiences and competitions will prepare them for employment in their chosen careers. Membership appears to enhance students' self-confidence in this regard. Eighty-nine percent of FFA students believe they can realize success in their chosen career area (Reese 2001). These students also have more specific career goals and are more likely to work while in high school, which serves to enhance their professional development.

Through participation in CTE student organizations' national conferences and competitions, students gain valuable professional experience. "In 2000, over 125 students traveled to national conferences to compete in contests, network with business people and peers, and learn information that is vital to their futures" (Wills 2000, p. 44). These activities give students opportunities to apply their evolving communication, leadership, and networking skills.

Businesses that support CTE student organizations become involved as a way to ensure that their employment needs will be met by the future generation of workers. The heating, ventilation, air conditioning, and refrigeration industry, for example, supports the Skills USA-Vocational Industrial Clubs of America (VICA) by enlisting companies to donate equipment for national competitions and provide employees to serve as judges. In this way, the industry has a vehicle for introducing students to its equipment and ensuring that schools connect academic learning with the skill demands of the workplace. This gives businesses an opportunity to have a hand in shaping potential employees; at the same time, the competitions afford professional benefits to the students. The gold medalist of the 1997 Skills USA-VICA competition, for example, was able to train at the Carrier company's Bynum Education Center in Syracuse, New York. He trained one on one with a Carrier worker and "Carrier picked up the cost of his airfare and accommodations" (Siegel 2001, p. 42).

Citizenship

Research shows that students who are members of youth organizations are more actively engaged in community as well as school activities. The Purdue study found that 90 percent of FFA members participate in school and community activities (Reese 2001). Another study revealed that students involved with student organizations were more likely to be involved in community affairs and organizations, school organizations, and church (Leventhal 1999). Activities for linking CTE student organizations with the community include job shadowing, service projects, student-organized field trips, employer-employee banquets, and alumni-student gatherings (Miller 1997).

How Organizations Are Changing as CTE Evolves

Student organizations will not be successful in the future unless they can motivate new students to join and participate in the activities. Two primary ways that CTE student organizations can achieve this goal are to (1) make their focus more relevant to today's workplace and (2) strive to recruit a diverse student population.

Workplace Relevance

Society has undergone many changes since the inception of most CTE student organizations and these changes influence how and where people work. When the FFA was started in 1928, for example, people were leaving farming communities and migrating to the cities. The organization was initiated as a way to keep vocational agriculture in the public school system and offer the typically white, rural youth a means of improving their farming production skills and developing a sense of self-worth and recognition for their accomplishments so they would remain in agriculture (Vaughn et al. 1999). Today, there are fewer and fewer family farms and a decreasing number of youth have family ties to production agriculture (Igo and White 1999).

To be viable today, CTE student organizations must be designed to satisfy the primary need of today's students—improving their employment potential in a technologically oriented workplace. They must draw their members' interests toward areas that offer job potential, e.g., in agriculture, it is important to provide opportunities that extend beyond agriculture production to business, communication, agriscience, and technology as applied in the agriculture industry (Gliem and Gliem 2000).

Diverse Membership

Other changes in society relate to work force composition. Today the workplace is composed of people with varied ethnic and economic backgrounds. Igo and White (1999) note that future generations of students involved in agriculture will not be from the typical rural areas, but from urban communities. To thrive, CTE student organizations must recruit students from these areas and from the various cultures they represent. In a study conducted to learn the characteristics of students enrolled in agricultural education who elected not to join FFA (Stagg and Stuller 1999), it was found that non-FFA members included significantly more Asians, African Americans, and Hispanics. This reflection of selective membership may be one reason that, of the over 800,000 students involved in agricultural education, only 450,000 are FFA members. CTE student organizations need to find ways to attract all students by providing and emphasizing benefits that membership will afford them, both personally and professionally.

The recruitment of diverse members should also include students with disabilities. Ploss, Field, and Frick (1996) describe youth with disabilities who have participated in CTE student organizations. One female student who was blind participated fully in FFA. The authors describe her enthusiasm for belonging to FFA and participating in its national competitions. They note that she was so professional and well spoken that the audience and often the judges were not aware that she was visually impaired.

Students can also promote membership in CTE student organizations by sharing with a diverse array of their peers the personal benefits they have realized through membership: For example, Rich Klein reports that "because of VICA, I did a lot of advanced study in my field" (Siegel 2001, p. 5). Katrina Miller notes that "through my TSA experiences I have learned to be confident in my abilities and move forward in my career goals" (Miller and Meuleners 2000, p. 24). Testimonials like these can be strong motivators for students who have little or no background in student organizations.

Young people have a variety of needs that must be met if they are to become mature, responsible, caring, and informed individuals. CTE student organizations provide a variety of opportunities that will help students in these areas. However, to be effective in the future, these organizations must recruit and embrace a more diverse membership and introduce members to occupations as they exist today.

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